Peer Editing in My Writing Class

By Liao Qiyi (China)

Many people would agree that teaching composition is much more difficult than teaching other language skills. From my experience of teaching composition to Chinese students majoring in English in the university, I find that peer editing or group evaluation is an effective way to help students overcome passivity and become strongly motivated in the writing class.

Writing as Process

If language is "part of wider social interaction and behavior," we are compelled to consider the communicative value of language and "introduce the process of interaction into the classroom" (Swan 1985:9). In the process approach, the focus of attention has shifted from the finished product to the whole process of writing: experience and question, prewriting preparation, draft writing, editing and rewriting, publication or sharing, and response and feedback from the readers. The teacher is no longer the center and the "angry error-hunter"; instead, he is a rather "humble fellow-writer who builds assignments and practice activities" from his own "first-hand knowledge of writing problems" (Kirby 1984:23). The shift of focus and the change in the teacher's role necessitate greater emphasis on activities such as collaborative group work and peer evaluation.

The following procedures, which my students have found helpful, include a development of Bruffee's approach (1980). They have been tried in classes of advanced students of English as a foreign language with descriptive, narrative, and mainly expository and argumentative writing.

Classroom Procedures

1. Collaborative Group Work. Research reveals that group work increases the intellectual and emotional participation or involvement of the students and combines "most effectively all aspects of communication . . . in the most integrated, non-threatening and flexible mode of class organization available to the teacher" (Bruffee 1980:77). I usually divide my class into four or five groups, each consisting of about five or six students. One of the students in each group assumes the role of secretary, records and reports what the members of the group have said, and keeps the group activities going. The regular activities for each group are reading aloud one's writing and holistic and analytical evaluation of samples.

2. Reading Aloud One's Writing. Each student in the small group is required to read his own writing clearly and slowly, indicating the beginning and end of each paragraph, and repeating the topic sentences for emphasis. Other students in the group are to listen carefully but not to comment on the writing for the time being.

The seemingly simple activity of reading aloud is helpful because it makes one's work public and turns writing into a social act. The sympathetic response of one's peers turns a group of individuals into a "learning community" and writing workshop. It also helps develop the writer's critical awareness and helps him write by ear and get rid of "awkwardness and pretentiousness in writing" (Bruffee 1980:108).

3. Peer Criticism. Next, each group will choose one or two of the students' writings as samples for peer evaluation. This consists of three steps: (1) general impression, (2) objective description of the form, and (3) discussion of the content.

For the first step, the students evaluate the samples by answering the following questions:

• What has the writer said in the paper?
• Is the description vivid? the time order clear? the development logical? and the argument convincing?
• Does the writer develop paragraphs properly and effectively?
• What do you think are the strengths of the writing?
• How well does the writing fulfill its purpose?

In a word, they treat the sample writing as a whole instead of a set of separate components. The components are considered simultaneously, and emphasis is usually placed on the strengths of the writing.

In the second step, the students evaluate the rhetoric from organization, sentence structure, and diction to mechanical errors. Here is a checklist for the second step:

Organization:
• Does the introduction clearly state the purpose of the writing and prepare the reader for the content?
• Is a suitable manner of development employed?
• Does each paragraph have a well-written topic sentence?
• Is there a clear connection from one point to another and a smooth transition between paragraphs?
• Does the conclusion reemphasize the purpose and summarize the content? Is the conclusion justified?

Sentence Structure:
• Are sentences complete and separated by end punctuation?
• Are sentences unified and coherent?
• Are sentences free of choppy, unnecessary, repetitive constructions?
• Are sentences free from logical flaws and mechanical errors?
• Is the sentence structure varied?

Diction:
• Are words used accurately?
• Are words concrete and specific?

• Does the language appeal to the reader's senses?
• Is the language appropriate to the paper's purpose and to the intended reader?

The analytical evaluation allows the students to comment on the quality of the samples, describe their strengths and faults, point out and focus on the specific problems, and make suggestions for improvement. It is time-consuming, but it pays.

Following the above steps, the students are ready to discuss the content. Now they talk only about the ideas, with no reference to formal errors. They discuss the subject they are judging, and at the same time discuss "the way their minds work in making the judgment" (Bruffee 1980:103). As the peer editors can compensate for one's strong points and deficiencies, it helps the writer as well as the editors overcome their "private way of thinking, their habits and their biases and preconceptions" (Bruffee 1980:103). The judgmental task usually consists of questions or propositions such as:

• Is money everything?
• Is man innately superior to woman?
• Only stricter laws can prevent crimes of theft.
• Recreational films should be shown only on weekends.
• Technology is more important than liberal arts.

Peer evaluation usually leads to a "tempered, adequately informed, well thought out conception" (Bruffee 1980:112). Besides, the students in the group can "celebrate with the writer over a good piece and commiserate over one that is going badly. They can also share the writer's relief over a problem solved" (Church 1985:178).

A questionnaire reveals that a majority of the students (91%) find themselves more interested in the writing class than before; 84% think group editing helps them make greater gains in writing quality than does the teacher's evaluation, and 80% have got a stronger critical awareness in writing as well as in evaluating their peers' compositions.

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